Case Study of Good Practice: Market Research
University of Teesside
Library & Information Services

L&IS Spring 2005 Student Survey

Introduction

In 2005 Library and Information Services at the University of Teesside purchased new software in order to conduct online surveys. This year's survey was conceived of as a pilot to test out the software, the methodology, and promotional methods. To our delight, we gathered responses from 1964 students, of which 1914 were University students (We also made the survey available to students based at the partnership colleges). This represents an overall response rate of 13%, and a full-time student response rate of 19%. The questionnaire was only available online.

Background

In previous years L&IS has conducted large scale questionnaire surveys utilising the Priority Search methodology with printed questionnaires. We used the quota sampling method and aimed for a 10% sample of each subsection of the University student population. In order to achieve this, L&IS staff administered the questionnaire, with teams (of staff) being sent out across the campus to find students who fitted the profile of each quota. This method was very staff intensive, and although the staffing costs are not available, it was an expensive survey to run.

In 2004 the decision was made to use an online questionnaire, because of the advantages that it offered to L&IS in terms of staff savings: administration of the questionnaire, inputting of the data, and analysis of the data. Other advantages that the online questionnaire offered were the opportunity to report the findings quickly and easily and that the students can complete the questionnaire at a time of their choosing rather than being forced to complete it there and then. The University has been for some years now promoting electronic communication, and many other Universities are using electronic questionnaires and so we are certainly not pioneers in this respect.

The first electronic survey that we conducted in 2004 was with the StARS (Student Academic Representatives). These are students who represent their year group on Programme Boards, and the scheme is administered by the Students' Union. We liaised with the Students' Union who hosted the survey on our behalf on their web site. Unfortunately, there were various problems with this method and we got a very low response rate.

We decided to purchase our own software, or investigate writing our own software, as there is considerable in-house expertise in web design. This would enable us to have control of the questionnaire, and its promotion, as we felt that our questionnaire competed with others which were available at the same time from the Students' Union website.

We then looked at the survey software market and at survey tools being used by other University libraries, and also searched the literature. The most common tool being used (mainly by Old Universities) was LibQual, and although there were clear advantages in being able to compare findings with other institutions, we felt that the questionnaire did not meet our needs in terms of the ease of completing the questionnaire and providing the data that we wished to gather. Another factor was that for comparison purposes we use a different 'family' of new Universities.

A lis-lirg posting yielded some good recommendations for software, and we were given the name of a contact person at Northumbria University. We telephoned and met with Carol Thompson, who we were aware had reviewed the survey tools market (Thompson, 2002). She offered us invaluable advice on the product that they had chosen, answering our questions about the use of the software and various problems we anticipated concerning methodology.

The decision was then made by Senior Management to purchase ***Snap*** software. We had decided not to write our own software principally because of the staff time that this would take, and the attendant costs would mean that it was cheaper to purchase an off-the-shelf product. The software is offered on

a perpetual licence, and although the initial outlay at £2490 was expensive, we were aware of the many staff savings that we would make, and that we would then be able to use the product for many smaller scale surveys or, for example, as an evaluation tool for information skills sessions.

Methodology

Questionnaire design

We decided to use the SCONUL survey template as a basis, although eventually our modifications to it meant that there appeared to be little that was recognisable from the original template. We used some questions from our own previous surveys and added many open questions.

The inclusion of many open questions meant that the questionnaire was student led: we did not merely ask about issues that L&IS staff were concerned about; we tried to give free reign to the students to enable them to comment upon any issue. The findings of the survey showed that this was the best way to approach the questionnaire design, as issues we thought students would raise, for example parking, temperature, and to some extent opening hours, do not appear to be major issues for the students.

There is a price with this methodology though; it takes a long time to analyse over 1000 responses to open questions, but it was worthwhile given the benefits with the validity of the data. In addition, issues raised by large number of students can then inform surveys in future years.

Sampling

We aimed for a response rate of 10% for consistency as this had been the aim in previous surveys. In comparison with our last major survey, we found that alongside the increase in student numbers there has been an increase in the response rate overall. However, as it was an online survey, we had no control over who completed the questionnaire, and so it was impossible to obtain exact quotas. There was a shortfall in some categories, most notably part-time students. This is a problem that the whole University faces, how do we communicate with this group of students? Recent in-house research suggests that over 50% do not access their University e-mail accounts, and many do not access other electronic media, such as Blackboard either.

Timing of the survey

It was decided to make the survey available for one whole month, and April was chosen, as it corresponded with when the previous surveys had been run. It is a busy time for L&IS, but did not conflict with major assignment and dissertation hand-ins. The timing of the survey is not at the ideal time in terms of the planning cycle, and many other Universities run their annual surveys earlier in the academic year. Our response rate does show that the timing of it was not seen as a major obstacle, and the much vaunted 'questionnaire fatigue' did not seem to be a major problem either. We feel that the students enjoyed the novelty of completing the questionnaire, and many students were surprisingly expansive in their responses to open questions.

Incentives

We looked at incentives being offered by other University libraries for survey completion, and they were generally either book-tokens, printing credits, or goods such as iPods, PDAs, and even a laptop in one instance. Due to our experience with other prize draws at the University we felt that cash would be the greatest draw, and our Assistant Director made £150 available as a fund for the incentives. After much discussion we decided to offer 3 cash prizes of £50 in a prize draw. Special arrangements with our Finance Department had to be made to enable us to do this, but we felt that it was worthwhile.

We will never know what the effect of the incentive was upon student responses to the questionnaire, which were very positive. However, there are many channels in which students are able to provide us with feedback, and so we do not feel that we have inhibited their opportunities to give us negative feedback.

Anonymity

We were concerned about the anonymity of the respondents and sought ways in which to ensure that we preserved anonymity, but which also prevented multiple responses from the same person. We did this by asking for their University e-mail address as this is composed of numbers and so is not readily identifiable. This also gave us an e-mail address to contact them by if they won the prize draw.

Promotion of the questionnaire

E-mail

One of the features of Snap is that it can be linked to a database containing e-mail addresses of potential respondents and e-mails can be sent out automatically. The e-mail contained details of the survey and the incentive, with a link to the survey. Our ICT Manager sent out 20054 e-mails, but there were 1123 bounce-backs from full mailboxes. In total 18931 students should have received the e-mail. We hoped that those who hadn't received the e-mail would see the other routes to the survey that were available and still complete it.

Publicity materials

We commissioned poster designs from a year two Graphic Design student, and we selected two of the designs. Posters were displayed prominently in the LRC, with a special display on the ground floor of the LRC. Posters were also displayed in the main buildings on the campus, the Students' Union and on the television network. We used the same design for the survey results button on the website.

We produced flyers and bookmarks and placed flyers on the screens of each of the 400 PCs in the LRC on the day that we launched the survey. Flyers were also handed out to students from all desks in the LRC and bookmarks were placed in books when they were issued.

Staff

Each of the L&IS Subject Information Team Leaders for each of the Schools were asked to help publicise the survey and they sent e-mails to academic staff in their Schools. Schools that used Blackboard extensively placed links to the survey on it. Links to the survey were also placed on intranets, and many students from the School of Computing used this link, as use of their Intranet is an essential part of their studies.

Word of mouth

This was mainly L&IS staff telling students about the survey at the desks or in Information Skills sessions. We found that very few of the qualitative responses related to academic staff telling them about the survey. In one

instance, a part-time student completed the feedback form on the L&IS website, commenting on the fact that they had been told about the survey by a member of academic staff, but only after the survey had been closed.

Partnership Colleges

There was a very disappointing response rate from the Partnership colleges. Posters had been forwarded to library managers at the Colleges, and links to the survey had again been placed on Blackboard. However, there is a real problem of lack of identification with the University for this group of students. If they have never visited the University LRC, they may have felt unable to comment on facilities and services offered to them there.

One of the questions in the questionnaire concerned how they had found out about the survey. ***Respondents were able to select more than one option.***

How did you find out about this survey?	**Number of responses (Base 1961)**	**% of responses**	**Full-time**	**Part-time**
E-mail	1524	78%	1359 (69%)	165 (8%)
L&IS web site	260	13%	230 (12%)	30 (1.5%)
Poster or other publicity material	191	10%	177 (9%)	14 (>1%)
Word of mouth	68	3%	49 (2%)	19 (>1%)
Blackboard	10	0.5%	8 (>1%)	2 (>1%)
Intranet	79	4%	72 (4%)	7 (>1%)

There was a link on the home page of the L&IS web site to the survey.

What we felt we could have done better

- Focussed efforts in gathering responses from part-time students
- Some of the responses that we gained from open questions were in some cases impossible to interpret. We asked “Have you ever experienced any problems using off-campus services?” to which 22% answered yes. They were then asked “Please can you tell us more about the problem that you experienced?” Responses to this question were largely impossible to categorise as students had real difficulty articulating what the problem had been, probably because they didn’t know if the problem had been with their service provider, or with the University web server, or with the database provider.

Tips

- If using Likert scales always make sure that the scale is symmetrical, for example, Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree is a symmetrical 5 point Likert scale.
- Involve an experienced researcher from outside of the department as a consultant at an early stage. Practitioner research is fraught with problems, and an ‘outsider’ enables a clear perspective on the data, thus ensuring that faulty conclusions aren’t drawn. Your experience is vital though in the interpretation of the data.
- If you want to ensure a good response rate offer an incentive. Be aware of your student profile and offer an appropriate incentive. Although we offered a fairly large incentive, even a smaller one, if relevant to the target group could yield similar results.
- E-mail is an effective way to promote your survey, and we did not receive a single complaint from students about spam. Text messages would also be a good way in which to communicate details of the survey with students.
- Get student numbers data from your Registry first before finalising your questionnaire, so you can match categories of student with available data to work out response rates. We asked students if they were on a Foundation Degree, but we were unable to get that data from the

Registry easily. Therefore we can only hazard a guess for this category.

- Pilot the questionnaire. This will give you some idea of:
    - Response times
    - Poor question design – check phrasing so answers to open questions aren't just yes or no
    - With online questionnaires you can set limits to number of characters that can be used in a response: make sure you have left sufficient space! Question routing can also be used, but think carefully through the implications of using it in each context.
    - Once you finalise the questionnaire don't be tempted to change it
- Try to include a member of the IT team in the project group – their help and lobbying on our behalf was invaluable
- Try to obtain information about your dissemination methods before you choose them – for example information on use of email by students would have alerted us in advance to problems with HEBP and part time students

Conclusion

This year we gained an excellent overall response rate to our student survey, but we found it difficult to reach all of the target groups. The best response rate was from full-time students based whole time on-campus. The most effective method we found of publicising the survey was an e-mail to students' University e-mail accounts with a link to the survey. We will be repeating the exercise in 2006, and will be investigating new ways to communicate with part-time students, in order to improve the response rate from this group. As with any survey, we will just have to wait and see!

References

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Dillman, D. A (2000). Mail and Internet surveys: the tailored design method. New York: John Wiley.

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